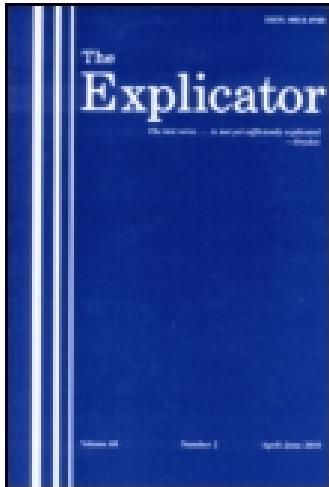




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The Significance of the Lake Monster in Louise Erdrich's *TRACKS*

Keywords: *Chippewa, Louise Erdrich, Lake Monster, Mishepeshu, Tracks*

Misshepeshu, the mythical Lake Monster in Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks*, is usually associated with Fleur, on the grounds that both of them represent the Native Americans' resistance to the dominant colonial power. For instance, Sánchez, Manzanas, and Simal speak about "the courtship of Fleur Pillager by Misshepeshu (the spirit of the lake)" (49). Gloria Bird contends that "Fleur's relationship to the lake, and the creature who lived in the lake" constantly repeats in the novel (44). María Ruth Noriega Sánchez also points out that Fleur "is mostly associated with nature, in particular with water and her spirit guardian Misshepeshu" (96). And Mark Shackleton writes that "the lake contains Mishepeshu, the Anishinabe water monster [. . .], representing Native resistance to white encroachments" (198). However, these critics disregard the fact that the symbolic presence of the Lake Monster has gradually transformed in postcontact era in America. No longer does the Lake Monster represent the indigenous people at the novel's time setting between winter 1912 and spring 1924. Conversely, the Lake Monster is the symbolic manifestation of the colonial powers in America and, consequently, is more closely associated with Pauline.

Fleur is an ambiguous character. Although an outcast, she, as a trickster, epitomizes Native American traditional culture; Like Nanabozho, the mythical American Indian trickster, Fleur is a good gambler. She successfully gambles for the life of her daughter in a dreamlike magical scene (Erdrich 159–60). Moreover, Erdrich compares Fleur with a wolf—an animal that

symbolizes Nanabozho in Chippewa mythology (Dewdney 127); Nanapush describes Fleur as a girl who “was wild as filthy wolf” (Erdrich 3), and Pauline characterizes Fleur with “the white wolf grin a Pillager turns on its victims” (19). Pauline also refers to Fleur as “the wolf those men met in Argus” (88), and as a “woman, lean as a half-dead wolf” (162).

However, despite being an embodiment of Native American values and beliefs, Fleur is still an outsider to her community, which is succumbing to white culture. Although most of the local inhabitants gradually accept the Western way of life, Fleur remains loyal to her land and her native identity and thus becomes an outcast, turning, in Anne Hegerfeldt’s terms, into an “actual monster [. . .] the evil” (129). The inhabitants of the reservation think that the Lake Monster wants Fleur, and she has “married the water man, Mishepeshu” (Erdrich 31). Gossip has it that Fleur “messed with evil” (12). Eli, her husband, also believes he has seen her wake up at midnight, walk down to the lake, and swim deep into the water to copulate with the Lake Monster (106). The gossip around the reservation seems so persuasive in the magical context of the novel that critics such as Jesús Benito Sánchez, Ana M. Manzanas, and Begoña Simal; Gloria Bird; María Ruth Noriega Sánchez; and Mark Shackleton recapitulate it.

However, almost half of the information we obtain about Fleur comes from Pauline, who is an unreliable narrator. Pauline suffers from hallucinations made worse by her ardent religious beliefs. She sees the tears of St. Mary’s statue, “which no one else noticed” (Erdrich 94). She spreads the rumor that Fleur killed the three men in Argus. But when Pauline addresses the readers of *Tracks*, she contradicts her statement: “It was Russell,” Pauline confesses to the reader, who killed the men (27). Later, Pauline negates this statement, too, by saying, “it was my will” that caused the death of the three men (66). Rampant contradictions in Pauline’s narrative prevent us from accepting as true her insinuations that Fleur is in relation with the Lake Monster.

Misshepeshu is a protean, mythical giant who often appears as a lion in ancient Chippewa mythology. Yet the postcontact era recontextualized Misshepeshu, and its significance began to change when the British Army set off to settle in the prairies. Victoria Brehm remarks:

The sobriquet “underwater lion” was applied to Micipijiu [Misshepeshu] when the Indians recognized his resemblance to the royal arms of England, which feature the lion, on British medals and trade goods. If the British had such a powerful creature as

totem, the Indians reasoned, that would explain their magical technology, their ability to drive the French off the lakes, and their ruthless economic control of the fur trade. With Micipijiu as their family manido [holy spirit], they controlled the supply of game animals and fish, and their agents decided who prospered and who did not. (689)

The natives redefined the Lake Monster in a new historical context and recontextualized it to explain the British sovereignty. As such, no longer does Misshepeshu symbolize the natives' resistance to the whites in *Tracks*. Hence, Misshepeshu begins to symbolize the colonizer, its authority, and its culture, rather than those of the colonized.

Furthermore, the novel provides some evidence that promotes the idea of the association of the Lake Monster with Pauline, rather than with Fleur. For instance, Nanapush, addressing Pauline, relates a folk tale in which he humorously suggests that Pauline has coupled with the Lake Monster (Erdrich 149). Besides, Erdrich employs parallel identification between the Lake Monster and Napoleon, the only man who has literally copulated with Pauline. When Pauline is on a wrecked boat floating on the Lake, Napoleon Morrissey tries to save her. Ironically, Pauline, mistaking him for the Lake Monster, "strung the noose [of her rosary] around his neck" and murdered Napoleon (202).

Furthermore, Erdrich employs lion-like qualities both to describe Misshepeshu and Pauline; Nanapush uses the word *lion* to refer to the Lake Monster (Erdrich 36). Pauline explains that the Lake Monster "takes the body of a lion, a fat brown worm, or a familiar man" (Erdrich 11). On the other hand, two times during the novel Pauline uses the lion as a simile to describe herself: "I addressed God," Pauline says, "not as a penitent, with humility, but rather as a dangerous lion that had burst into a ring of pale and fainting believer" (196). Yet the decisive moment when she lifts her guise and helps us identify her with the Lake Monster arrives late, when she utters her final sentence in *Tracks*: "*Leopolda*. I tried out the unfamiliar syllables. They fit. They cracked in my ears like a fist through ice" (205, emphasis in original). She decides to change her name to Leopolda, which in Latin means "like a lion."

Indeed, Misshepeshu, which in the postcontact period is represented by the image of a lion, no longer reflects native resistance to colonial power. The Lake Monster undergoes complete transformation, allies itself with

colonialism, and becomes antagonistic to the Native American society, thus evoking Pauline rather than Fleur in the novel.

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